

Media Backgrounder

Georgia's Unique Model for Election Reform

In the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election and the ensuing chaos of the Florida recount, only three states moved aggressively to address the clear need to replace antiquated voting equipment with new systems that are more accurate, accessible, secure and user friendly.

Those three states – Florida, Maryland and Georgia -- took different paths in their quest for election reform. Georgia is the only state in the nation to adopt a single, statewide solution for the upgrade of election equipment, to deploy it simultaneously in every county, and to pay for its acquisition entirely with state, rather than county, funds.

Florida's Piecemeal Approach

Florida, the scene of so much election controversy, enacted legislation that placed a mandate on counties with punch card or central count optiscan voting to replace those units with either precinct count optiscan or electronic voting terminals.

Florida state officials made available to counties a limited supply of funds to assist with the equipment upgrade. But despite the lessons of 2000 and the landmark Bush vs. Gore Supreme Court decision, no effort was made to achieve uniformity in either equipment platform or vendor. Florida's approach left it to the discretion of counties to select the type and brand of new voting systems and to develop all the programs necessary to support those new deployments.

Florida's election reform model unfortunately created a number of obstacles for both election officials and voters:

- Because of the lack of uniformity, with different counties using different equipment platforms provided by different vendors, voter education efforts were more difficult and complex. No broad-based media campaigns or educational programs could speak to all voters with the same message.
- Florida state officials placed mandates on counties and provided some of the financial resources necessary to meet those mandates, but otherwise took a "hands off" approach to the complex challenges associated with new voting equipment deployments. Not only equipment evaluation and selection, but technical support, testing, and election official and poll worker training were all left in the hands of counties, without coordination or knowledge-sharing at the state level.
- With no carefully constructed uniform road map for deployment, counties were left to themselves to devise mechanisms and initiatives to educate voters and train those most directly responsible for election day success – poll workers. In the

Sept. 10th Florida Primary some 15 counties operated electronic systems in their first major election. Thirteen of those counties saw relatively smooth deployments with few reported problems. But two large south Florida counties – Miami/Dade and Broward – experienced very significant operational failures, including polls opening late and voters enduring long delays and uncertainty as to whether they would be able to vote. In the days since that election, media accounts have traced these failures to inadequate planning, preparation, and recruitment and training of poll workers by election officials in those two counties. When poll workers don't show up for work until 9, 10 or 11 am, or don't show up at all (as was reported in Dade and Broward), when they are completely untrained on how to get the units up and running, those are failures of county management and training.

- It should be noted that no Florida county operates the Diebold electronic voting systems selected by Georgia. However, the key variable between success and failure in the 2002 Florida Primary appears to be the adequacy of county election management. And all Florida counties were handicapped by a “go it alone” deployment model that provided no coordinated state support for these difficult initiatives.

Maryland Replaces Its Most Antiquated Systems

In 1999 the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation requiring that Allegany, Dorchester and Prince George's Counties replace their mechanical lever voting devices by 2002. Subsequently, the 2000 presidential election spotlighted for Maryland policymakers the high incidence of error in Montgomery County, the last remaining jurisdiction to operate punch card equipment. In 2001 the legislature passed significant new legislation authorizing the State Board of Elections to certify and acquire a new voting system for use in these four counties, which collectively represent 40 percent of the state's total voter roll.

Last December the Maryland Board chose Diebold's Accuvote touch screen systems for precinct voting – the same system Georgia subsequently selected. The cost of the acquisition was split evenly between the state and participating counties. In Maryland's General Primary September 10th, the four touch screen counties reported good performance and broad public acceptance of the new system. According to Donna Rahe, Dorchester County election director, “Our first touch screen primary election was a tremendous success. The voters of Dorchester County adapted to the touch screen technology extremely well, and the combined coordination efforts of the county's election staff and Diebold Election Systems caused a very smooth transition to the new election system.”

Georgia's Election Reform Model – A Consensus For Uniformity, A Full State Investment, Coordination and Partnership With Counties

Georgia's response to the chaos of the 2000 presidential election stands alone. Uniquely among states, from the beginning Georgia set a course that focused on finding the best uniform solution that would meet the needs of voters in all 159 Georgia counties.

In its 2001 session the Georgia General Assembly passed SB 213, unanimously in the Senate and with only one dissenting vote in the House. This bipartisan legislation, proposed by Secretary of State Cathy Cox, set forth an action plan to send Georgia to the head of the line in election reform efforts, including a mandate that the state move to a modern, uniform voting system to be acquired solely with state, rather than county, resources.

The bill created a 21st Century Voting Commission to evaluate equipment alternatives, study the experiences of other states and counties, conduct public hearings, oversee a pilot test of electronic systems in the 2001 municipal elections, and make recommendations to the General Assembly and Governor on the equipment solution that would best meet the needs of Georgia voters. The multi-partisan nature of this initiative was reflected in the membership of the Voting Commission – eight nonpartisan, four Democrat, four Republican, one Independent and one Libertarian. The Commission gained valuable, real-world experience with electronic voting systems during the November 2001 municipal pilot program. The pilot utilized equipment from six manufacturers deployed for use in regularly scheduled elections in 13 Georgia towns and cities. Exit polling of nearly 2,200 voters who cast ballots on the equipment was extremely positive, with 94.5 % of respondents indicating that Georgia should upgrade its voting system to an electronic platform.

In its report to the Governor and General Assembly released in December 2001, the Voting Commission unanimously endorsed the concept of moving Georgia to a uniform system of DRE (direct recording electronic) voting, with optiscan as the uniform solution for absentee voting by mail. Governor Barnes subsequently recommended, and the General Assembly approved (again with broad bipartisan support), \$54 million in state bond funds to acquire and deploy the new voting system in time for the November 5th, 2002 General Election.

Of critical importance, Secretary of State Cox also sought and obtained approximately \$4.5 million in additional budget funds (spread over two budget years) for a wide ranging set of programs to support the deployment, including statewide voter education, election staff and poll worker training, equipment acceptance testing and other assistance. The contract entered into with Diebold Election Systems also assures that extensive training, technical support, warranty coverage and other enhancements are provided at no cost to the counties.

Unlike its peers, Georgia's election reform model has committed unprecedented state resources to assure that counties have the tools they need for a smooth deployment of accurate, accessible and user-friendly equipment this fall. This strong state-county partnership sets Georgia apart in the drive to modernize election systems in America.